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"In fellowship of death": Animals and Nonhuman Nature in Irving Layton's Eco-poetics



Abstract

Irving Layton is not usually considered a “nature poet,” yet his work often features careful observations of nonhuman nature. Jacob Bachinger’s ecocritical reading of a few of Irving Layton’s most frequently anthologized poems examines the underappreciated eco-poetic aspect of his work. Bachinger pays specific attention to a recurring theme in many of Irving’s best known poems, such as “The Bull Calf” and “A Tall Man Executes a Jig” — the poet’s examination of a dead or dying animal. Layton’s examination of the deaths of these animals exists on a continuum in which the poet moves from an anti-pastoral to a post-pastoral position.

My purpose here is to examine Irving Layton’s use of the pastoral motif and examine his underappreciated eco-poetics. I will readily admit that there are probably many other Canadian poets who would appear to be better candidates for an ecocritical reading; after all, if Layton is associated with any particular region or environment in Canada, it would be urban Montreal. Clearly Layton was never William Carlos Williams’ literary “backwoodsman” (53), but nonhuman nature is, all the same, a recurring theme in his work. Layton employs the pastoral motif in some of his best-known poems, such as “Cain” and “A Tall Man Executes a Jig,” in order to discuss our relationship and identification with nonhuman nature (especially jeopardized animals). His position is an eco-poetic one as it is notably ethical in orientation, which distinguishes it from what could be called “nature poetry.”

J. Scott Bryson provides a helpful distinction between eco-poetry and nature poetry when he makes the case that eco-poetry “differs in many ways from the tradition of romantic nature poetry” (3) because contemporary eco-poets “attempt to address contemporary issues and concerns that earlier nature poets have either been unaware of or have not been forced to

deal with" (5). Thus Bryson argues that eco-poetry is really a recent development, emerging from the ecological devastation of the 20th century. Drawing on the work of critics such as Terry Gifford and Lawrence Buell, Bryson defines eco-poetry as having three characteristics: 1) eco-poetry maintains "an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world;" 2) eco-poetry presents "humility in relationships with . . . nonhuman nature;" and 3) eco-poetry offers "intense skepticism concerning hyper-rationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an over-technologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (5-6). We can see eco-poetry, especially in light of the third characteristic, as being "message" poems, but eco-poetry is never just a collection of "vague 'right-on' rhetoric" (Gifford 172). If the poetry functions *only* as environmental propaganda, it then becomes little more than a form of pastoral sentimentality (Gifford 172).

In Irving Layton's "The Bull Calf," we can see that the poem skirts pastoral sentimentality due to its overly emotional focalizer. With careful poetic attention, the poem memorably dramatizes the death of a young animal only moments after its birth. Layton describes how the bull calf is "taken from his mother and the barn smells" outside into the "fierce sunlight" where the farmer admits, "'No money in bull calves'" (29). The young animal is struck with "the ponderous mallet" until it is dead, stiff "like a block of wood" (29). The calf's body is then thrown into a pit where "[i]t made a wet sound, a sepulchral gurgle, / as the warm side bulged and flattened" (30). The poem ends with the line, "I turned away and wept" (30).

That final line is, arguably, out of place. In the inaugural edition of *Canadian Poetry* in 1977, Peter Hunt complains that the last line of "The Bull Calf" is "too explicit a summing up; it protests too much" (n. pag.). If we agree with Hunt, the poem is an early example of what

Carmine Starnino calls Layton's tendency "to trust rhetoric to do the work of the imagination" (183). The final line does at first seem to be little more than editorializing, but we shouldn't let the poem's seemingly straightforward intention and execution deceive us. Instead, the final line ought to be read as introducing an important ambiguity into the poem: for what or for whom does the poet weep? Is it for the bull calf that was treated so cruelly? Or is it for the men who must be cruel to the helpless animal? Another set of questions worth asking are: Is the treatment of the calf so terrible? Or is the poem an example of our discomfort with the realities of rural life when those realities won't conform to the desire for an idyllic pastoral?

If the poet is actually weeping for the dead bull calf, the poem does indeed become little more than pastoral sentimentality, which in this case takes its form as a kind of unhappiness about the hardships of rural life. Ted Hughes, for instance, has pointed out in response to people's shock at the violent things he describes in his poems about farm life in Britain: "We either have a will to examine what happens or we have a will to evade it" (qtd. in Gifford 137). Thus Layton perhaps reveals his will to evade the realities of farming, hiding behind a curtain of tears. It is, after all, easier to turn away and cry than to question the treatment as cruel, or consider the farmer's feelings during such an act. Further, he sets up the possibility that he is weeping *for* the farmer who must kill the bull calf. Because there is "[n]o money in bull calves" (29) and the farmer can't afford to keep him alive, the "Freeman" has little choice in the matter, and thus the use of the term Freeman for the farmer becomes a subtle irony in the poem. Layton's description of the young bull's helplessness—"([t]he thing could barely stand" (29))—and its regal beauty ("he still impressed with his pride" (29)) becomes an emotional build-up to the inevitable conclusion: the farmer must bring the animal's

brief life to an end. If the poet weeps for the farmer who must earn his bread in this hard way, the poem then becomes a more considered – albeit emotional – response to the realities of rural living. Instead of evading those realities, the poem demonstrates a willingness to examine them.

In the poem's final stanza, the poet's gaze keeps changing in curious ways. After seeing the bull calf as a stiff corpse, "a block of wood" (29), the poet looks across at the scene in general, looking below the hill's crest, down to "the river snuffled on the improvised beach (29)." The word "snuffled" here is intriguing: nature does not seem capable of offering anything picturesque, instead the river dribbles by like a runny nose. The poet then begins to participate in the scene in an active way: "We dug a deep pit and threw the dead calf into it" (30). Although the poet might seem to identify with the wasted bull calf, his participation in the digging with the farmer and the other man ("the visiting clergy") indicates where his allegiance is. The calf is in death "so beautiful now" (30), but its demise was always a foregone conclusion. Of course, by choosing to sympathize with the farmer, there is not necessarily less sympathy for the death of the bull calf. Instead, the poem attempts to hold them in balance as they are both victims of forces beyond their control. And thus, "The Bull Calf" becomes what Leo Marx would call an "imaginative and complex" (5) version of the pastoral, because it "do[es] not finally permit us to come away with anything like the simple, affirmative attitude we adopt toward pleasing rural scenery" and instead it "call[s] into question, or bring[s] irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (25).

In the poem "The Predator," we have a situation similar to the one in "The Bull Calf," except in this case the focus is on a wild animal rather than a domesticated one. Here, Layton

describes in detail the dust-covered corpse of a small fox that he encounters by the side of a country road — again, a pastoral setting. The fox lies in a pool of blood, having gnawed off its paw to gain its freedom. As in “The Bull Calf,” the poet looks at the dead animal admiringly, reflecting on the creature’s renowned cunning and beauty. In “The Predator,” however, the treatment of the animal subject differs because of the significant absence of the human being who caused the damage (the trapper or the fox farmer). Because of that absence, the tone is remarkably different from “The Bull Calf.” While the presence of the farmer creates a human context for the death of the animal, here in “The Predator” no such context is given; thus, the animal’s death seems to be only gratuitous. As a result, Layton is able to moralize more freely, allowing for a kind of prophetic indictment: since human beings are cruel and callous, they will be the ultimate victims of their own violence. According to Layton, the human animal oppresses other creatures, “Yet hates himself, / knowing he’s somehow contemptible; / with knives and libraries the dirtiest predator of all” (78). Distancing himself from his fellow human beings, Layton identifies with the dead fox and addresses it directly.

Ghost of small fox,
hear me, if you’re hovering close
and watching this slow red trickle of your blood:

Man sets even
more terrible traps for his own kind.

Be at peace; your gnawed leg will be well-revenged. (78)

The title's irony is now clear: human beings are the "dirtiest predator." But we are also our own victims, caught in our own "terrible traps" made of "knives and libraries." Representing technology and rationality metonymically through knives and libraries, Layton crafts one of his strongest ecological messages in "The Predator" by articulating what Bryson would call "intense skepticism concerning hyper-rationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an over-technologized modern world" (6). Imagining the kind of traps that humans set for their own kind easily spins into "a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (Bryson 6).

But what happens when the poet joins the ranks of the predator and becomes a killer himself? In "Cain," the poem's focalizer kills a frog. As in "The Bull Calf" and "The Predator," Layton directs his poetic attention to the animal; after shooting the frog an inch below its head with his son's air rifle, he watches the creature die in vivid detail, noting how the frog "jumped at the surprise / Of it, suddenly tickled or startled" and then makes "a miserable flop, the thrust all gone / Out of his legs" (60). Because of the poem's title, the frog must then be the poet's brother as well as his victim. This may seem heavy-handed, but the death does weigh heavily on the poet's mind and he returns to the scene of the crime the next day to see what had become of the frog's little body. He finds the dead amphibian with its hand on its belly, looking as if it were smiling: "his wide grin / Coaxing a laugh from us for an aside / Or perhaps a joke we didn't quite hear" (61). The poem's final line suggests that it is a joke we will one day hear quite clearly — death itself being the joke. There is a sense of brotherhood or fellowship here as Layton acknowledges that he—and we—all share the frog's comic-tragic fate: "Death makes us all look ridiculous" (60).

Given the nasty end to the lives of the bull calf, the fox, and the frog, the poet must somehow incorporate this kind of brutal death into his version of the pastoral or continue to suffer anxiety. However, it is not enough to simply say *et in Arcadia ego*; some further measure is required. In “A Tall Man Executes a Jig” Layton fully reconciles this theme and approaches what Terry Gifford would call a post-pastoral position. According to Gifford, the post-pastoral is a literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language. (149-50)

This is significant because Layton’s use of the pastoral has strong anti-pastoral strains, but “A Tall Man Executes a Jig” incorporates the negative anti-pastoral elements and transcends them.

In the first few sonnets of the sequence, the tall man’s relationship with his surrounding environment is conventionally pastoral: he is perfectly at home with nature in the field where he has spread his blanket. The setting for “A Tall Man” is a field bordered on one side by a highway and on another side by mountains. As Leo Marx has noted, the pastoral is bordered on two sides (22): on one side by civilization, with “the ambiguous rumbles of cars” (*Wild* 83), and on the other by wilderness, with “the ruddied peaks that pierced the sun” (*Wild* 84). He is part of a kind of natural community. Even the stinging insects make him glad. He sees himself in nature and nature reflects his own image back to him; he sees his sleeveless arm reflected in the field around him so that “[t]he grass, / Even the wildflowers became black hairs / And himself a maddened speck among them” (83). His body blends with nature and nature finds a place for his body. When a bee hovers nearby, it leaves him for a marigold — the tall man is just

another flower among many in the field. This is a place where culture and nature do not seem to be at odds with one another, as casual references to Euclid, Donatello, and Plato can coexist with the field, the insects, the flowers, and the fading sun.

There is tension, however; though the man seems at ease in this pastoral space, he has some trouble naming what's going on around him. The insects that form an aureole around his head are nameless, almost confusing to him. At first, he refers to them as "whizzing flies" (83), later he decides they must be gnats, and then he admits that he'd call them fruitflies "except there was no fruit / About spoiling to hatch these glitterings" (83). Without names, he describes them instead as "jiggling motes" (83), "black jots" (84), and "minuscule black links / Of a chain" (83). There is some sense of failure here in his inability to name these bugs satisfactorily. Once he has doffed the cloud of insects around his head, the tension does not abate. He sees that the sun is going down on the mountains like a god, and he waits: "If ever / The hour of revelation was come / It was now" (84). But no Wordsworthian revelation occurs; "[t]he sky darkened. Some birds chirped. Nothing else" (84). The tension and anxiety become even clearer: nature will not cooperate—it fails to provide him with easily named insects and it also fails to provide him with the kind of transcendental message that he has come to expect.

The god-like sun offers no revelation, but a message arrives just the same. It's found close to his feet: looking down, the tall man sees "temptation coiled before his feet: / A violated grass-snake that lugged / Its intestine like a small red valise" (85). This image becomes transitional in the poem, realigning his expectations of the natural world. He watches the brutalized snake "crawl towards the hedge, / Convulsing and dragging into the dark / The satchel filled with curses for the earth" (85). Here we begin to approach an anti-pastoral

sentiment, borne upon the evidence that nature simply will not cooperate: things die and they die brutally and painfully. The snake appears to have been crushed by a passing car—another victim of human cruelty and indifference. However, instead of succumbing to cynicism, instead of articulating an indictment of the kind found in “The Predator,” the tall man resolves not to curse (even though the snake itself is depicted as cursing: it crawls towards the ditch “filled with curses for the earth”). Instead, the tall man reclines – stretches himself back down on the ground, beside the now rigid snake – in a position that can be read as prostration, “[i]n fellowship of death” (86) with the snake and presumably with all of nature, with creatures that will all inevitably die: with “perished badgers and raccoons / The claws alone remain, gripping the earth” (86). The final sonnet in the sequence recognizes that all things – including the tall man himself—will die and will die in the hard struggle for survival, with “claws . . . gripping the earth.” Acceptance of this is transforming.

In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood comments that “[w]hat makes the tall man tall” is that “he resists temptation: he witnesses the suffering [of the snake] but does not curse” (85). This is what Gifford would refer to as one of the “fundamental” aspects of the post-pastoral: “the recognition of a creative–destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution” (153). I would add that the key here is not only the *recognition* of a creative-destructive universe, but the *acceptance* of that universe. In “A Tall Man Executes a Jig,” Layton’s post-pastoral includes and accepts violent death. I contend that this version of the pastoral envelops, ultimately, all his earlier poems about animals, about the pastoral, about nonhuman nature – “The Bull Calf,” “The Predator,” “Cain,” among others – because it is without cursing, without indictment, and

without the earlier weeping. This is because "A Tall Man" is neither simply pastoral nor anti-pastoral, but points meaningfully towards the post-pastoral, which is, it seems to me, the only option, eco-poetically speaking, open to us in this day and age. If, as Lawrence Buell claims, "pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without" (32), then we need to find a version of the pastoral that we can work with. "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" anticipates that the post-pastoral was the only field left open. The simple, idealistic pastoral is not possible any longer (if it ever were possible) and its flip-side, the anti-pastoral, results only in weeping and moral indictment. This is not to say that "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" invalidates the earlier poems, but it does contextualize and reframe them significantly.

Over the decades a number of critics have discussed Layton's interest in nonhuman nature (such as Patricia Keeney Smith, Margaret Atwood, and, more recently, Rowland Smith), but none have examined Layton's poetry as ecologically-minded or have read it ecocritically. Though he may seem to be an unlikely eco-poet, it becomes clear that Irving Layton employs the pastoral trope in some of his most well-known poems in order to explore humanity's interactions with its environment. In particular, he explores how humans — farmers, trappers, poets with air rifles — treat the animals they find in their environment. Often his position is an anti-pastoral one, in which he sees human beings as alienated from their environment and as dangerous to that environment. But "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" may be read as the final poem in a series of pastoral poems in which Layton offers a vision of a new relationship with the environment, a post-pastoral relationship. "A Tall Man Executes a Jig" explores the possibility of reconciliation in which humans — who can be, at times, tall — might be able to see themselves

as part of an environment and like all other living things exist in a “fellowship of death.” We are all (human and nonhuman) locked into what the Buddhists would call *samsara*, but in this cycle of life and death, there is *fellowship*. We are all connected by this and share this experience. As such, this can be understood broadly as an ecological message.

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